

Foster-care ranch suit may settle

Father Joe Carroll to build at other site

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CAMPO – Almost four years ago, Father Joe Carroll of St. Vincent de Paul started planning to build a ranch for foster-care children on donated land off state Route 94.

But his hopes for the project turned sour when Alpine businessman Tom Dyke, who had donated the 200 acres of land, became an opponent of the proposal and was embroiled in a lawsuit with the Catholic charity over the property.

Yesterday, Carroll said a tentative settlement of the lawsuit is near, allowing Dyke to buy back the property he had once given away. The foster-care facility will instead be built on 118 acres of donated land off Lake Morena Drive, a few miles west of the original site, Carroll said.

"It makes Tom happy," Carroll said. "It seems everyone will be happy."

The community was sharply divided over the proposal to build the facility, initially known as Promiseland, but now called Father Joe's Children's Village. Some opponents said the plans to house 240 foster children and their supervisors didn't fit in with the rural flavor of the community and would draw down the area's water supply.

Carroll said the revised plans haven't been finalized because the papers in the lawsuit settlement and the escrow on the new piece of property haven't been signed off. But he said he plans to present the proposal to the community at the June 2 meeting of the Campo-Lake Morena planning group.

In fall 1999, Dyke donated two pieces of land totaling 627 acres to St. Vincent de Paul for a camp to house children who were in foster care because they had been abused or neglected. The 427-acre northern section of the property includes a 5,400-square-foot house and a guest house. The 200-acre southern section is undeveloped.

Carroll said St. Vincent de Paul still plans to use the northern section of land to hold corporate retreats and camping events. The southern property would have been the site of the foster-care facility.

The plans for the children's ranch hit a snag when Dyke refused to allow access to the property by turning over a piece of land he owns with two partners alongside state Route 94. Dyke's two partners were willing to donate the 116 acres of land, but Dyke refused.

St. Vincent de Paul filed suit against Dyke seeking to divide the property so that the charity would have access to the ranch property on its two-thirds share and Dyke could retain his one-third share.

Carroll said the lawsuit settlement, if approved, calls for Dyke to buy back the 200 acres he donated, plus another 130 acres owned by St. Vincent de Paul.

Dyke could not be reached for comment yesterday. At previous public meetings, he has been sharply critical of Carroll, accusing the priest of misleading him about plans for the ranch.

Carroll said the 118 acres now planned as the site of the foster-care children's facility is the Flying A ranch, which has been dormant since it ceased being a working ranch about 20 years ago. The property is owned by the Stephen and Mary Birch Foundation, a charitable trust that has donated millions to local organizations through the years.

Carroll said the land is more level than Dyke's property, saving in construction costs. He said he hopes to build there beginning in late 2004.

"We still plan to build a village out there for children," Carroll said. "It's just a different location."

"I want to build it in my lifetime."

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